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THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIANITY'S ESSENCE

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Christianity has seemingly undergone many changes in the course of its life. Notwithstanding numerous attempts which have been made to establish and preserve uniformity, many variations have continued to manifest themselves in the history of the Christian movement. Not only has its form in one period differed from that of a subsequent age, but different groups of people within the same period have become exponents of varying types of faith. As a consequence of this tendency, modern Christianity in its totality is a widely diversified phenomenon. The Greek and the Roman churches have many distinctive features, Protestantism is sharply differentiated from Catholicism, Protestant denominations differ more or less widely from one another, and variations may often be observed among members of the same communion.

This situation raises a serious problem. What is Christianity? If we define it as the religious life of men, wrought out in different periods of history and amid different surroundings, the fact of variation causes no difficulty, for change is a fundamental law of life. In religion, as in other spheres of the human spirit's activity, data from the past and new experiences in the present blend to form a new product, as men in each new generation react upon their new world of reality. Similarly different groups of individuals within the same age stamp their type of faith with the characteristics of their own peculiar world. From this point of view Christianity is the religious life of a vast number of individuals, the story of whose conduct and thinking has been recorded by history. Hence this religion is fundamentally developmental, and its character at various periods in history is to be understood in the light of the environmental forces which entered into the making of religious life in any given age.

On the other hand, it has not been customary to regard change as an essential feature of the Christian religion. Variation in its history has commonly been viewed as quite incidental, or even detrimental, to the life of genuine Christianity. This is defined as some static quantity of belief, experience, or practice, which is assumed to have existed from the time of Jesus, and is reproduced in the life of all persons who are truly Christian. The fact of variation is disposed of by setting aside as spurious all phases of this religion which are not in agreement with some particular type which its devotees designate for themselves as "genuine." Or, if one is more generously disposed, he may find essential Christianity in a modicum so small and so broadly defined that it can be allowed to exist even among members of widely differing communions. But from this standpoint Christianity is never a vital development. Beneath all variations there exists a static quantity which is called "essence," while the changing phenomena which appear in its history are merely excrescences.

Which of these two views is the more satisfactory for present-day thinking? This is a particularly urgent question. It is fundamental to any study of Christianity's origin, and especially to the question, much discussed at present, of Christianity's relation to other religions in the world in which it arose. If we think of the new religion as vitally developmental, a spontaneous growth, then the conditions surrounding its early life form an important consideration for the understanding of its character. If, on the other hand, it is treated as a static quantity, whose character and content are essentially fixed at the outset, the question of relationship to other faiths is not fundamentally important. It may have a secondary interest as bearing upon the externals of Christianity's history, but it has little or nothing to do with an understanding of its real genius. Everything essential to the new faith is specifically supernatural in origin, a purely divine insert into human history, communicated to men through the medium of a special revelation. Adumbrations of this revelation are to be seen in the Old Testament, its climax is reached in the work of Jesus and the apostles, and its activity either ceases with the close of the New Testament Canon, or continues in less vigorous fashion within

certain narrowly restricted channels. Thus Christianity is an ecclesiastical organization, a system of doctrine, a body of ritual, a type of experience, whose validity is directly guaranteed by God. Man's part is to accept the revelation, to guard it against defilement from human accretions, and to pass it on to others.

Since, according to this hypothesis, true religion must be strictly supernatural in origin, as well as in all the essentials of its development, and since Christianity alone is true, it is futile to talk of genetic relations to other faiths. They were huge systems of error, entirely lacking in divine sanction, and consequently utterly incapable of making any valuable contribution toward the genesis of Christianity. They may have influenced somewhat the course of its expansion, yet only in external and unessential matters. And even thus they are not to be thought of as lying wholly outside the divine scheme. They were rather intended to prepare the way for Christianity, either furnishing some helpful conditions for its spread, or else constituting a kind of foil against which to set off its superior character. To discover in the course of history any vital relations to paganism, or even to post-canonical Judaism, would mean a corresponding disparagement of the Christian religion and a vitiation of its authority.

This attitude has dominated Christian thinking from an early date, and finds ample illustration in both Catholic and Protestant circles. Orthodox Romanists have always defined their religion in terms of a God-given quantum of revelation, original in content, complete at the outset, and historically unconditioned except that its completeness and perfection were displayed more fully in the expanding life of the historic church. Changes may be admitted in the course of history, even changes necessitated by contemporary conditions, but Christianity is not to be regarded as in any real sense a product of evolutionary forces. This assertion applies even to its relation to Judaism. While assumed to preserve everything of permanent worth in the latter, the relation of the two is not one of organic evolution. Christianity rather is a new and fuller revelation, a fresh divine insert, for which Judaism has merely prepared the way. In the course of subsequent history popular pagan religion may have affected somewhat the church's rites and

ceremonies, and Greek philosophy may have had some influence upon the development of doctrine, but it is a gross error, according to the Catholic view, to think of these outside forces as introducing anything in the least alien to the original substance of the Christian revelation. Historical growth is but the further unfolding of the heavenly robe brought to earth by Jesus, passed on by him to the apostles, and intrusted by them to the divinely established and officered church. The garment never needs to be altered or repaired, but only to be further unfolded.¹

The older Protestant estimate of Christianity's nature rested upon the same basic principle. The new religion as revealed by Jesus and perpetuated by the apostles was a purely divine deposit, essentially complete from the first. The fundamental divergence between Protestantism and Catholicism lay in their different theories about the preservation of the deposit. According to the latter the infallible church was its perpetual guardian and interpreter, consequently the whole ecclesiastical development within orthodox Romanism was the continuation of genuinely original Christianity. The Protestant Reformers, on the other hand, took the Scriptures rather than the church as their ultimate authority and so found original Christianity in the Canon. Historical development from New Testament times on to the Reformation was regarded as a period of decline, in which the process of corruption proceeded gradually at first, but later increased in velocity and extent until finally genuine Christianity was almost completely obscured. It could be recovered only by a return to the age of the apostles, its divine character being assured by an infallible Scripture. Thus Storrs in his lectures on *The Divine Origin of Christianity*² says of the New Testament books that they hold Christianity as nothing else does. While it has been "variously tinted and refracted" by human representations of it, still these primitive writings continue to reveal its spiritual substance and vital force. They are our inheritance from God, and this faith "is the one system of religion

¹ Cf. articles "Christianity," "Development of Doctrine," and "Revelation" in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1907 ff.) and the article "Église" in *Dictionnaire de Théologie catholique* (Tome IV, Paris, 1911).

² Boston, 1884.

on earth for which the eternal creative spirit, from whom the spirit of man is derived, is directly responsible, and to which his veracity is pledged" (p. 6).

This did not mean that ecclesiastical organization and doctrinal elaboration were thought by Protestants to form no part of Christianity. On the contrary, many features which emerge in post-apostolic times were regarded legitimate because believed to be scriptural. Thus Anglicans could retain the notion that the church is a supernatural organization, divinely equipped to administer the rites of salvation. Though inculcating only that which is "agreeable to the doctrine of the Old and New Testaments and which the Catholic fathers and ancient bishops have collected from that very doctrine,"¹ still according to a Canon of 1604 the Church of England differs from the Catholics only "in those particular points wherein they were fallen both from themselves in their ancient integrity and from the apostolic churches which were their first founders." Bishop Jewel² affirmed that the Anglican church conformed not only in its doctrine, but also in its sacraments, to the church of the apostles and of the old Catholic bishops and fathers. According to this conception Christianity is still, as in Catholicism, a purely supernatural contribution to human history, its integrity being carefully preserved within divinely determined limits.

Other sections of Protestantism attached less significance to the perpetuation of the divinely authorized ecclesiastical organization and placed chief stress upon individual religious life. Yet Christianity was a significant historical quantum, more especially on its doctrinal side. While Scripture was the ultimate norm for faith, much genuine Christianity was to be recognized in the doctrinal development of post-apostolic times. This position has been stated more recently by the late Professor Orr. He believes "the labor spent by myriads of minds on the fashioning of dogma has not, as so many in our day seem to think, been utterly fatuous, and the mere forging of fetters for the human spirit."³ Yet this work of doctrinal

¹ Cited from the Convocation of 1571, by A. C. A. Hall in the article "Protestantism" in the *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, Vol. IX (New York, 1911).

² *Apology for the Church of England* (London, 1685).

³ *The Progress of Dogma* (New York, 1901), p. v.

elaboration was not a merely human affair, but was pursued in agreement with the divine character and intention of Christianity. The general tendency of this type of interpretation is to define Christianity's essential content in terms of a divinely directed type of metaphysical speculation guaranteed in the first instance by the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. The exposition of sound doctrine never goes beyond this original revelation, nor are the intellectual attainments of a later age ever able to import anything essentially new into its content. If a contribution is new it must in the nature of the case be untrue. The function of interpretation is only to expound in greater detail the perfect original.

These various opinions of both Catholics and Protestants are in fundamental agreement on the question of Christianity's nature. It is a quantity of divine instruction, supernaturally given and designed to cover all the essentials of true religion. Whether it is more perfectly preserved in an ecclesiastical organization, in a Canon of scripture, in a system of metaphysical speculation, or in some combination of these is only a subsidiary question. In any case Christianity is purely supernatural in origin and maintains its unique originality in every legitimate stage of its career. Human experience and historical circumstances contribute nothing to its making; they merely provide channels for its spread, in so far as they do not obscure or retard its progress.

The nineteenth century witnessed a general expansion of man's mental horizon and with it came a keener sense of real connection between earlier and later periods of history. Scholars became more vitally conscious of progression in the course of human experience, so that the notion of development entered by degrees into the realm of historical study. Religion was naturally tardy in accepting and applying to itself the conception of evolution, yet some scholars, Catholic as well as Protestant, recognized that the older method of interpretation did not do full justice to the developmental side of Christianity. The changes through which it had passed were felt to be more extensive and thoroughgoing than were possible on the traditional view. Cardinal Newman, from the side of Catholicism, recognized the pressure of this demand and sought to meet it in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.¹ He is more gener-

¹ London, 1845, 1894^o.

ous than most of his Catholic predecessors in finding extensive changes in the history of doctrine, a fact which, he says, "embarrasses us when we consult history for the true idea of Christianity." While in the last analysis it is a supernaturally revealed religion, an original deposit of faith, its historical manifestation is humanly conditioned and so subject to "the general method by which the course of things is carried forward." Externally it is an earthen vessel, being the religion of men, and so is due to grow in wisdom and stature. Consequently the elaboration of doctrine is not merely a process of logical deduction from Scripture, or from any given set of earlier doctrines, but is a product of Christianity's developing life. It is futile to suppose that the New Testament, or any assignable number of books, can delineate all possible forms which a divine message will assume when submitted to a multitude of minds. The whole Bible, as well as the entire history of Christianity, is subject to the law of development.

Have we here a new conception of Christianity's nature according to which it becomes a product of religious life rather than a divine insert into history? Such might, at first sight, seem to be the case, but Newman very quickly assures his readers that this is not his thought. No matter how extensively Christianity may appear humanly conditioned, "the powers which it wields and the words which proceed out of its mouth attest its miraculous nativity." Furthermore, no phases of development are legitimate which do not ultimately fall within the pale of ecclesiastical sanction, and these natural and true developments were all contemplated by Christianity's author, "who in designing the work designed its legitimate results." Security against error and perversion is guaranteed by the maintenance of the original type which has remained from first to last unalterable.

Thus it is apparent that Newman does not really believe it is Christianity's nature to evolve, at least not in the sense of genuine, organic evolution. Changes in its history do not inhere primarily in its character as a religion, but are due to the medium through which it is compelled to work. Variation is necessary only because it is the inevitable attendant of "any philosophy or polity which takes possession of the intellect and heart"; it is in the nature of

the human mind that "time is necessary for the full comprehension and perfection of great ideas and that the highest and most wonderful truths, though communicated to the world once for all by inspired teachers, could not be comprehended all at once by the recipients . . . but have required only the longer time and deeper thought for their full elucidation." Thus it is not essential Christianity which evolves but only its historical elucidation, and the two things are in reality treated as separate entities. After all Newman signally fails to find any vital place for the conception of growth as fundamental to Christianity's nature.

Among Protestants the problem of development was approached from a different angle. Newman had been compelled to face this question in order to legitimize the history of the church in which change and variation no longer could be denied. If the authority of the ecclesiastical organization was to be maintained, the notion of development must be admitted into Christianity far enough to cover the changes which time had wrought in the outward history of the church. Protestants, on the other hand, except those Anglicans who swung far toward Rome in their reaction against liberalism—a movement of which Newman was a leader before his outright adoption of Catholicism—easily dismissed all ecclesiastical developments as mere perversions of true Christianity. Its history was not a vital growth, but a process of degeneration and decay. The problem of so defining Christianity as to give the notion of development any important place in the definition did not become a real issue for Protestant scholars until they felt it desirable to bring religion into more vital relations with the historic life of the human spirit and to recognize that the New Testament, which had constituted the Protestant norm for faith, was itself the product of growth.

A tendency to ally religion more closely with humanity and so to make it less a thing from without early appeared in English deism and German rationalism. But these movements were more negative than positive in their results. They denied to Christianity much which had traditionally been regarded as essential to its nature, without formulating a new definition of its character with a view to displaying the real genius of its historical development. But

German idealism, especially as expounded by Hegel, made an effort to supply this needed definition. For him the universe is at heart spiritual, or perhaps better, intellectual, being grounded in the divine Idea, the absolute Reason, whose essential nature consists in living development. Ideally the world is the very product of this development of the logical thought of the absolute spirit. Since thought and being are thus a unit, philosophical dialectic reproduces, at least in kind, the evolutionary process of the absolute, and every historic product of the human spirit—custom, law, art, science, philosophy, religion—is a more or less perfect expression of the absolute. Progress is the result of conflict and discord in the general trend of all things which are synthetically evolving nearer and nearer to the divine Idea, itself the ultimate and absolute truth. Similarly in the realm of religion every new stage in the development of the human spirit marks a new revelation of divine truth.

What, then, is the Hegelian understanding of Christianity's nature? Seemingly the notion of development, not only in externals but also in essentials, has been made central. Closer inspection, however, shows that even this mode of interpretation does not find Christianity to have been so thoroughly developmental, a process of vital historical growth, as might at first sight be imagined. To begin with, Hegel had little interest in the historical life of Christianity as a whole. His primary concern was with doctrine only. Nor did he view this in its entirety, much less was he interested in its actual historical growth. In closing his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*¹ he affirms that his aim has been "to reconcile reason and religion, to show how we know this latter to be in all its manifold forms necessary, and to rediscover in revealed religion the truth and the idea." In other words, he is concerned with the abstract elements of universality in Christianity rather than with its concrete phenomena, and he discovers the universal through a process of philosophical reflection acting upon the content of religious ideas. The vital situations out of which these ideas come are not made the norm for estimating their character. That

¹ London, 1895; German, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* (Berlin, 1832, 1840²).

is determined by relating them to the imaginary absolute. Accordingly, Hegel can say of the religious situation in his own day that "philosophy which is theology is solely concerned with showing the rationality of religion," and so "forms a sanctuary apart and those who serve in it constitute an isolated order of priests who must not mix with the world and whose work is to protect the possessions of truth." This is not the attitude of one who thinks Christianity a genuine product of vital historical forces. It is, on the contrary, ultimately an esoteric philosophy constructed according to a pre-arranged divine pattern.

For Hegel Christianity is also, in the last analysis, a religion of external authority. He vigorously opposed two movements which were exerting an important influence on thought in his day. These were pietistic individualism on the one hand and the personal freedom of thinking advocated by the "Enlightenment" (*Aufklärung*) on the other. Both were condemned by Hegel because they were felt to be dangerously non-authoritarian in principle. The former tendency, which received new strength from Herder and Schleiermacher, was criticized because it elevated religious feeling above reason and so seemed to leave religion no authoritative content. Naïve piety might indeed experience truth, Hegel said, but it could not demonstrate that what it felt was truth—"thought is the absolute judge before which the content of religious feeling must verify and attest its claims."¹ Hegel would not deny the legitimacy of feeling. He would only affirm that one cannot establish its validity except by means of philosophy. To cite his words, "philosophy thinks what the subject as such feels and leaves it to the latter to settle with his feeling."² Now this conflict between concrete feeling and the rational process, when carried through to its final reconciliation, means the attainment of absolute truth. In so far as the finite spirit, which by its very nature rises into this state of reconciliation, reaches this goal in the history of the world, an external religious authority has been established.

Hegel also severely criticized the "Enlightenment" because it exalted individual reason to first place, ignored the rational absolute,

¹ *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, III, 148.

² *Ibid.*, p. 149.

and so dismissed Christianity as unworthy of rational beings. Such procedure is a "conceit," a "vanity of the understanding," which divorces individual reason from all outer authority and consequently "is the most violent opponent of philosophy and is displeased when the latter points to the element of reason in the Christian religion, when it shows that the witness of the spirit, of truth, is lodged in religion." While Hegel would allow subjective freedom of thought in the conquest of truth, the content of truth was not a product of subjective thinking, but was something "inherently and essentially true, true in and for itself." This absolute has been revealed in the course of history, particularly in the Christian religion, and so has become a norm for determining the results of personal thinking. Since only those items of faith which receive philosophical justification are to be treated as normative, Christianity is essentially an objective revelation whose authority is discovered and guaranteed, but never produced, by philosophical speculation. Revelation is essentially the rediscovery of God's thought by means of human thought, proceeding in accordance with the laws of its divine prototype.

This interpretation of Christianity's nature is in the last analysis undevelopmental. The human attainment of truth is, indeed, an evolutionary process, but the real content and substance of that truth are determined from without. The growth of Christianity, as a historical phenomenon, is recognized, but it is not a purely spontaneous growth, since it must conform to a model called the absolute, which fixes the goal before the process of development begins. Thus Christianity is essentially the reproduction of a set of ideas divinely determined beforehand. Man's struggle to attain them may be long and laborious, but they are in no true sense a product of his struggle. He is able to grasp them because of the fortunate circumstance that he is made in their image; he is never to be regarded as their creator. Newman, we found, restricted the notion of development to the historical elucidation of Christianity, leaving its essential content quite untouched by conditions of historical growth. Hegel applied the principle of development more rigorously to the method by which man attains the essential in religion, but he still defined that essence

as an independent entity, the absolute, whose real content was not in the least determined by the developmental forces of history.

Hegel's neglect of historical phenomena was recognized even by his followers and they early attempted an application of his philosophical principles to the specific data of Christianity, especially in reference to the origins of dogma. F. C. Baur,¹ and the members of the Tübingen school in general, found early Christianity to be a development out of specific, conflicting historical forces. The Jewish particularism of the Palestinian community on the one-hand, and Pauline universalism on the other, were finally synthesized through an evolutionary process into early Catholicism, and the books of the New Testament were thought to represent different points of view emerging in the course of the controversy. Many factors in the life of the ancient world—tendencies to universalism within the Roman Empire, different Hellenistic philosophies, in fact the whole cultural situation of the times—had contributed toward the ultimate evolution of the new religion. Consequently the historian's task is a broad and comprehensive one. If he would truly understand early Christianity he must trace its genetic relationships, showing how history is a vital product of the human spirit in its evolutionary struggle toward harmony with the divine reason.

While Baur's procedure thus approximated to a truly scientific historical method—a fact not always appreciated by critics of the Tübingen school—he confined attention so exclusively to the intellectual side of human activity, neglecting its emotional and volitional phases, that his conception of Christianity's content was not sufficiently comprehensive. He did maintain in a more realistic way than Hegel had done that human ideas and historical events are closely interwoven. Hence early Christianity, on its doctrinal side, was more vitally developmental, but its ultimate essence was still defined in terms of the Hegelian doctrine of the absolute, and therefore, necessarily remained undevelopmental in the last analysis.

In more recent years the Hegelian interpretation of Christianity has been considerably modified, especially in the direction of

¹ Compare especially in this connection his *Das Christentum und die christliche Kirche der drei ersten Jahrhunderte* (Tübingen, 1853, 1860²).

recognizing more fully its concrete, historical character. Accordingly, the absolute becomes less a predetermined quantum and more a product of historical growth. Troeltsch, for example, maintains that the Christian religion is to be placed side by side with other faiths, and is to be studied by the same general scientific method of investigation. Since they must be treated as normal evolutionary developments in the life of humanity, so it must be viewed as a strictly historical evolution. If it is to take precedence over other religions its supremacy can be maintained solely on the ground of actual merit historically demonstrated. It appears, however, that Christianity as a matter of fact is the best religion, and so has a just claim to the title "absolute." As yet its complete finality may not be fully established, but its development is surely moving toward this end. Enough of its distinctive characteristics have already emerged to furnish adequate ground for faith in its ultimate absoluteness. So Troeltsch can speak of an "essential" Christianity in whose history the fundamental "ideal" is being realized through progress toward the "absolute goal."¹

This would seem to be as near an approach as idealistic philosophy can make toward a purely developmental conception of Christianity's nature. Since the notion of an absolute cannot be abandoned, there must always be a point, even though it be located in the distant future, where evolution ceases. And in proportion as the fundamental ideal is historically realized, the absolute itself is attained. Accordingly, in the course of history, certain phases of Christianity already pass into a zone where the laws of growth are no longer active. These phases constitute a hypothetical essence like in kind to the final quantitative residuum in which Christianity's evolution is to issue when development ceases and unessential features evaporate. To insist that this absolute is not imposed from without, but is itself attained through a strictly historical evolution, does not alter the fact that ultimately and ideally Christianity is thought of as a quantity standing outside the range of the historic

¹ See his *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte* (Tübingen, 1902, 1912²); also articles "Dogmatik" and "Glaube und Geschichte" in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, II (Tübingen, 1910); and "The Dogmatics of the religionsgeschichtliche Schule" in the *American Journal of Theology*, XVII (1913), 1-21.

process. Moreover, it is a question whether the assumption that development issues in an absolute, itself determined solely by the process of development, is not fundamentally a contradiction in terms, or, at least, an undemonstrable hypothesis. How can we say that history has reached an ultimate goal at any given stage of development unless some standard from without is superimposed as a criterion for determining the ultimate? Without this criterion must we not refrain from applying the term absolute, even at the remotest stage of historical growth? So long as history is being made, the possibility of realizing a higher ideal than anything previously attained or even conceived seemingly cannot be denied, if one insists upon a consistent and thoroughgoing application of the developmental idea.

The pietistic attitude, though criticized by Hegel, was destined in later times to exert an important influence upon the definition of Christianity's nature. This mode of thinking, which received a strong impetus from Herder and Schleiermacher, was supplemented by Ritschl and with some modification has become widely prevalent, especially among the so-called modern "liberal" theologians. Although representatives of this view commonly hold to some form of belief in an absolute, they do not attach primary worth to philosophical formulation of dogma, but place chief stress upon personal religious experience. They define Christianity mainly as a type of experience realized within the community of believers. While absolute identity of experience for all members of the community cannot be affirmed, there is supposed to be a common element sufficiently representative to constitute the essence of Christianity, and to furnish a basis for belief in its distinctiveness and finality.

Schleiermacher advocated essentially this position when he defined religion as a "feeling of dependence," a consciousness of the individual's relation to Deity. Christianity, however, he regarded as a genuine product of the human spirit rather than a new divine insert into life. Man has been so created that spiritual growth is a fundamental law of his constitution; in fact, all spiritual life has its ground in the creative purpose of God, who by hidden laws effects a revelation of himself, now dimly, now brightly, through the medium

of earthly individuals, but supremely in the person of Jesus. Thus even Jesus' God-consciousness is fundamentally a personal attainment on his part, reached through the normal exercise of his own spiritual personality. Similarly believers, while availing themselves of historical means of grace, must find the essential content of religion in a personal experience of God, worked out in accordance with the inherent capabilities of the individual. The help which comes from without does not create religion, but only stimulates and brings to fruition powers already latent in humanity.

On this interpretation Christianity is developmental, but only in a restricted sense of the term. There is development in the personal attainment of experience, yet this experience is conditioned by an original supernatural endowment bestowed upon humanity at creation. Moreover, the perfect embodiment of the God-consciousness in the person of Jesus is a norm for determining the true character and content of experience. Thus, ultimately, Christianity is supernaturally conditioned and is made to conform to an objective criterion, so that the process of growth pertains only to the working out of these given data in the religious life of the individual and of the community. Furthermore, Schleiermacher paid little attention to the historical career of Christianity. He generally ignored the influence of varying local conditions and contemporary thinking as possible factors influencing religious experience in successive periods of history. In fact, he virtually maintained that Christian life and thought moved in a world apart. For example, he affirmed that doctrines were not the product of speculative thought in any age, but proceeded directly from religious states of feeling, and it was never necessary for one to correlate philosophical thinking with religious beliefs. Since the latter were derived immediately from the Christian's consciousness of salvation, which in turn followed from faith in the historical person of Jesus as Savior, theology had nothing in common with physical science and philosophy. Christianity, viewed in this way, could not be intimately connected with the actual development of human life in any period of historical evolution.

To Ritschl¹ the need of treating Christianity in a more strictly

¹ See particularly his *Die Entstehung der altkatholischen Kirche* (Bonn, 1857).

historical fashion appealed more strongly. This seemingly was an inheritance from his earlier training in the Tübingen school. He followed Schleiermacher, however, in defining religion as man's sense of dependence upon God. Christianity more specifically is the religion in which the God-consciousness is most truly realized because of the revelation of God in Christ. Ritschl sought to correct the strong individualism of Schleiermacher by emphasizing the significance of the community, the church, which constitutes the visible kingdom of God, but he followed Schleiermacher rather than Baur in defining the distinctive features characterizing the historical life of the community. For him the significant thing in its history was not a conflict of ideas issuing in doctrinal postulates, but a type of experience which remained essentially uniform in content from the time of Jesus and the apostles on. In this fundamental respect there was unity between Paul and the primitive Palestinian believers, and this same original feature was also held to be preserved in the early Catholic church, though it was gradually obscured by degenerating influences from the contemporary heathen world, particularly in the realm of philosophical speculation. Thus for Ritschl, as for Schleiermacher, Christianity was in no fundamental sense developmental; there was no vital interaction between essential Christianity and contemporary life during the course of history.

Between Ritschl and the modern "liberals," as represented for example by Harnack,¹ there is no radical difference of view regarding Christianity's nature. Harnack insists that the historian nowadays must show how one thing has grown out of another, he recognizes that religion too is no ready-made structure but a genuine growth, and he finds Christianity not only to have been subject to change in the past, but to be in a state of constant development. Yet "essential" Christianity is something quite distinct from the totality of these varying historical phenomena, commonly summed up under the general designation "Christianity." A

¹ Cf. his *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (Freiburg, 1886-90, 1894-7³); English, *History of Dogma* (London, 1896); *Christianity and History* (London, 1907); *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Leipzig, 1900); English, *What Is Christianity?* (New York, 1901).

restricted section of the whole is chosen as kernel while the remainder is declared to be only husk, and the principle of selection is determined by defining this "essence" in terms of a particular type of individual experience, the consciousness of fellowship with God, the believer thus repeating Jesus' experience of God's fatherhood and man's sonship. This ethical-religious element formed the heart of Jesus' message and constitutes the kernel of Christianity in every genuine stage of its career.

Since this essence is *ex hypothesi* a distinctively Christian possession, the influence of contemporary life upon primitive Christianity becomes a question of only minor importance. While environment does, in a general way, affect personal experience, the source of a truly Christian experience is God as mediated by the historical Jesus whose personal influence is perpetuated by believers. As Harnack puts it, "at the end of the series of messengers and agents of God stands Jesus Christ. They point back to him, and it is from him that has sprung the river of life which they bear in themselves as their own."¹ The tributaries which empty into this river are either so small as to have no appreciable effect, or else their impure waters only discolor the original stream, and necessitate the work of filtration. Thus Christianity is essentially static and quantitative rather than developmental, and the problem of its relationship to contemporary life practically drops out of sight.²

The so-called Modernist movement within Roman Catholicism also places much emphasis upon Christian experience, though not confining its scope so narrowly as many "liberal" Protestants do. The collective Christian consciousness and the doctrine of divine immanence are basal in the Modernist's definition of Christianity. It is primarily an affair of the human spirit in fellowship

¹ *Christianity and History*, p. 44.

² Similarly Mezger, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte* (Tübingen, 1912), makes the untranscendable nature of Christian experience as revealed in Jesus the guaranty of Christianity's absoluteness. Christian development pertains to the more perfect realization of fellowship with God, but this type of experience is not subject to change, and can never be transcended, nor does it owe its genesis to evolutionary forces. In other words, Christianity is ultimately a canonical experience, and everything else that goes into the making of its history is of secondary moment if not, indeed, really spurious.

with the immanent God of Christian faith, and so is largely developmental in character. In contrast with the traditional Catholic view, primitive Christianity is not regarded as a perfect robe to be further unfolded but as a vital organism constantly expanding into new stages of life; and, as opposed to the Protestant notion of deterioration, every stage in this development is held to be part of a legitimate and necessary growth.¹ Christianity at first was a religion of spiritual simplicity, "formless and undogmatic," which spread over the Roman world "adapting itself to the mentality and spiritual education of every region and borrowing from each the elements most suited for its own further development."²

Yet by a kind of dualism Christianity from the start is found to contain a static element which remains unaffected by development. To cite the Modernist *Programme* "everything in the history of Christianity has changed—doctrine, hierarchy, worship; but all these changes have been providential means for the preservation of the gospel spirit which has remained unchanged through the ages."³ There is "a religious experience which once evoked by the preaching of Christ has remained substantially the same thing under all its successive embodiments."⁴ Since this immutable essence constitutes the fundamental and distinctive thing in primitive Christianity, the Modernist does not need to be concerned primarily with the question of environmental influences. They have no vital bearing upon Christianity's ultimate genesis and essential character, but pertain only to its later expansion.

This survey of opinion shows how generally Christianity has been defined in static and quantitative terms. At one time it is

¹ See Loisy, *L'évangile et l'église* (Paris, 1903, 1908⁴); English, *The Gospel and the Church* (London, 1903).

² *The Programme of Modernism* (New York, 1908), pp. 79 f.

³ P. 92.

⁴ P. 77. Cf. also Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, p. 171: "Setting aside all theological subtleties, the Catholic Church, as a society founded on the Gospel, is identical with the first circle of the disciples of Jesus if she feels herself to be, and is, in the same relation with Jesus as the disciples were, if there is a general correspondence between her actual state and the primitive state, if the actual organism is only the primitive organism developed and decided, and if the elements of the church today are the primitive elements grown and fortified, adapted to the ever increasing functions they have to fulfil."

said to be identical with an ecclesiastical organization, which is guaranteed by mechanical revelation or approved by practical tests of efficiency. Again, it is a fixed system of doctrine, whose finality is established by appeal either to a scriptural canon, or to a certain form of metaphysical speculation. Finally, it is a specific type of religious experience, either narrowly restricted in content, or else made broad enough to include different varieties. Even when the notion of development is introduced to account for changes in the course of history, a certain immutable and historically unconditioned "essence" appears at the outset, or emerges in the process of growth. This forms the primal element in Christianity's constitution, and is the ultimate ground of its distinctive character as a religion. The student of Christian origins is, therefore, mainly concerned with this initial and fundamental essence. The question of contemporary influences is wholly secondary, since it relates only to the later history of this given original and never to its primary constitution. All phenomena fall into two categories, namely, original or borrowed, genuine or spurious, essential or unessential.

On the other hand, it is becoming more and more difficult to maintain the legitimacy of these distinctions. Any effort to fix upon an irreducible minimum of genuine "essence" can succeed only by setting up some quantity of experience, or belief, or practice as essential while all other features are denominated unessential. But it is very difficult to justify this procedure. In the first place, one who follows this course cannot define Christianity comprehensively but must center attention upon certain restricted phases of its total phenomena. Even if it were possible to determine with perfect certainty a given sum of items possessed in common by all Christians, it would still be quite unfair to neglect all other features which may have been equally important and essential at certain periods and within particular circles. To affirm, for example, that the essential elements of Christianity in the first century were only those items which believers of that day have in common with the "liberal" theologian of the twentieth century, is to eliminate as unessential to first-century Christianity its realistic eschatology, its belief in demons and angels, its vivid supernaturalism, its sacramentalism, its notion of the miraculous content of religious

experience, and various other features of similar importance. Certainly primitive Christianity cannot be perfectly understood without taking account of these items and one may fairly question the legitimacy of any interpretation which does not make them even "essential" to its existence in that age.

Furthermore the customary distinction between genuine and spurious is likely to be misleading. It assumes that a sharp line can be drawn between what we know to have been original with a certain group of persons like, say, Jesus and the apostles, and constituent elements from other sources. Indeed, it would be quite impossible to distinguish rigidly between "original" and "received" in the religion of the apostles, or of Jesus himself. They all lived in vital contact with a specific environment, and their religion was the immediate outcome of personal reaction upon their several worlds of reality. Not only is it thus impracticable to separate between genuine and spurious in their religion, but it is also quite misleading. Everything was genuine in so far as it was the expression of genuine conviction and experience on their part and answered a real religious need of the time. Similarly in later times reaction upon new worlds of reality results in new phases of religion whose genuineness, however, cannot be fairly impugned merely on the ground of their newness. If they arise in answer to an actual demand of the age they surely constitute genuine factors in religious life. Only when one assumes that a specific set of ideas from a particular group of individuals can be definitely set apart as constituting everything belonging to genuine religion, may all other items be classed as spurious. But this assumption is both practically and theoretically a very precarious one.

An even more serious difficulty with defining Christianity in terms of some static essence is the fact that any such definition deals with certain products or objective characteristics of this religious movement rather than with its inner life, which alone can accurately reveal its real genius. Fixed quantitative items, whether of practice, of doctrine, or of experience, do not pertain to its ultimate constitution, for these essentials do not take us beyond the convictions of those individuals who happen to be sponsors for these various data. For the source of these items we must go to the lives

of persons and communities who established organizations, formulated doctrines, and gave specific definition to the content of experience in order to conserve and legitimize for the benefit of future generations certain results of their own religious living. These things may have seemed to them particularly significant, yet a strictly genetic definition of Christianity's nature must proceed not merely from some quantity of deeds performed or opinions held by its advocates, but from the inner religious life of actual persons.

It is true that Christian persons for nearly nineteen hundred years have been contributing toward a fund of historical data on the basis of which we may describe certain characteristics of this religion in the past. But no specific excerpts from these data, and no composite of them, can be equated with Christianity as a whole. These formulations will, at best, be merely products—perhaps in some instances only by-products—of the Christian religion in the full sense of the term. While certain phases of a religion may quite properly be described in terms of specific historical remains from any or several periods of its life, a study of its real genesis and its peculiar genius must go beyond all alluvial deposits to the fountain sources of the stream. In this fundamental and comprehensive sense Christianity is truly seen only in the actual lives of Christians, and its content and development are conterminous with the content and growth of their religious living.

From this point of view Christian history is the story of spiritual endeavor on the part of a certain portion of humanity. In this effort the individual lays hold upon various helpful factors which history and immediate surroundings may furnish, but his religion is ultimately the product of his own vital activity. The appropriation of past values, whether they are esteemed as supernatural revelation, or are treated as more normal products of experience, may occupy an important place in his consciousness. But the really constituent factors in his religion are the motives which control his attitude toward the past and direct him in the selection of concrete religious data; the forces which determine experience, belief, and ritual; and his own effort to contribute his quota of helpfulness to succeeding generations. In short, his religion comprehends the whole range of his personal reaction upon his own

peculiar world of reality, as this reaction is exhibited in the entire evolution of his spiritual life.

Hence Christianity cannot be adequately defined as a static "essence." On the contrary it must be viewed as the evolution of religious life, and its character and content in any particular period of its history can be ascertained only by looking to the personal lives of Christians in that age. Thus it is a vitally developmental religion from the start, and the factors which enter into the determination of its life must be sought among the specific religious forces which acted upon the lives of the first Christians. This discloses at once the necessity of taking into account the possibility of genetic relationships between the new movement and other faiths, Jewish as well as pagan, with which the Christians were so closely associated. The primary question is not how many static items other religions may have supplied to Christianity, but rather how far the impulses and motives for religious living and the standards by which religious values were estimated—for these are the forces which determine experience, doctrine, and conduct—were brought over by Christian converts from other faiths, or were inspired by contact with other religions on the mission field.